Netwatch

By Jim Carroll

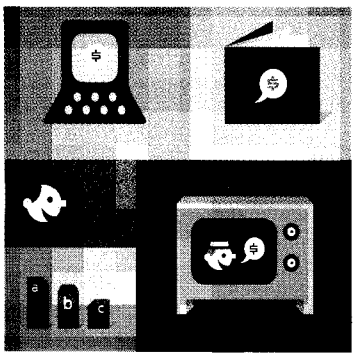
Your guide to business & accounting on the Internet

Don't be myth-informed

If you send an e-mail to five friends at 7 a.m., and an hour later they send it to five more friends, each of whom forwards it to five more people within the next hour — and this continues throughout the day — by 5 p.m. your message will have reached some five million people.

Such is the power of information distribution in the modern age — a world in which a new form of "myth-information" can sweep the planet and alter our view of issues and events in but an instant.

Clearly the Internet has emerged as a powerful and useful business tool, yet it also continues to create havoc when it comes to disseminating information. This is most evident in our willingness to accept urban legends, fraud and other forms of obviously false but widely accepted beliefs that can quickly spread online.



Consider, for example, the recently falsified image depicting US presidential candidate John Kerry with Jane Fonda at an anti-Vietnam war rally in the early 1970s. Carefully prepared from two separate photographs, it was such a clever forgery that it made its way around the world within a matter of hours. Not surprisingly, some people who saw the image concluded that perhaps Kerry wasn't quite the war hero he was made out to be.

It wasn't until someone realized that the photo was a fraud that the real story came out, and people began to realize that they'd been had yet again.

All of us know people who are ready to throw out critical judgment, careful thinking and thoughtful analysis when it comes to information online. A good example is the role that Internet chat boards played during the tech stock run-up of the '90s.

Why are people so willing to accept what they see online without the degree of due diligence they might apply in the real world? That's a good question — and one that doesn't have an easy answer. As accountants, we should continue to think about the challenges this world of myth-information provides from a business perspective. Is there a role we should play in terms of myth-information debunking? Should we be providing some type of online attest function to critical business information? Is it even possible to do so?

Perhaps — if we look to website Snopes.com as a model. Run by a husband and wife on a shoestring budget, Snopes is dedicated to examining online urban myths, either proving them right or debunking them based on careful research. Certainly you've been at the receiving end of some pieces of myth-information that Snopes has examined — such as an often circulated (and undeniably false) report that the post office plans to tax e-mail, or the picture of the tourist standing on the top of one of the World Trade Center towers as one of the ill-fated jets approaches behind him. These are but two of the countless hoaxes that have quickly circulated online.

The fact is, we live in an era of myth-information, in which ideas, suggestions, threats and stories can spread at lightning speed. That's why as professionals we must explore the boundaries of the role we can provide in society, in a world in which information travels blindingly fast, without borders, without critical assessment and without sufficient dubious skepticism and judgment.

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